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ABSTRACT

A large-scale representative survey was conducted in Flanders to assess the living conditions and competence of 6- to 12-year-old children. Subjects were 1,798 pupils from 68 primary schools who completed a questionnaire on different aspects of their lives and a Dutch version of Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children. The 6- to 8-year-olds in the subject population completed an altered version of the questionnaire. Adult respondents included 1,240 parents and 113 teachers. Questions were broad and covered the following areas of children's lives: family, parents' employment, school environment, friends, and leisure. Among the findings were the following: the majority of children are living with their married biological parents. Most children feel happy in their families and have a good to very good relationship with their parents. Most like or love going to school and are happy with their teachers. The questionnaire, in which the child is the unit of observation and analysis and in which the entire attention is given to the child's point of view, is on the interface between sociology and psychology. It was concluded that it is possible to associate children as respondents in research and obtain reliable and scientifically justified information on children's living conditions. (An appendix describes the design and layout of children's questionnaires, including a sample page. Contains 48 references.) (LBT)

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Running head: CHILDHOOD IN FLANDERS FROM THE CHILD's POINT OF VIEW.

Childhood in Flanders from the child's point of view.

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Paper at the Conference on Childhood and Children's Culture Esbjerg, Denmark.

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Abstract

This study represents the first large-scale representative survey in Flanders on the living conditions and competence of primary school children, in which not only parents and teachers but also children are actively involved and questioned in an exhaustive and standardised way. In 68 primary schools –a representative random sample of the primary schools of the Flemish Community and the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium- all pupils of one level whose parents consented (n= 1798/2141), completed a questionnaire on different aspects of their lives (family, parents' employment, school, environment, friends and leisure) and a Dutch version of Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children. For the 6 to 8-year old children (n = 958) both questionnaires were adapted. About 69% of the parents and 90% of the teachers completed questionnaires on the living conditions of the children.

Primary results are given and the scientific and social value of the survey is discussed.

Introduction: Scope description and implementation of the CBGS Survey

This survey of the Population and Family Study Centre (CBGS) is intended to discover the quality of the living conditions of 6-12 year-old children as well as their perceived competence. Separate questionnaires for children, parents and teachers were drawn up and completed in order to record objectively and subjectively perceived features of families, living environment, school, friends and leisure time.

In Flanders no large-scale representative survey had ever been conducted on living conditions and competence of primary-school children, in which not only parents and teachers but also children are actively involved and questioned in an exhaustive and standardised way. Therefore we thought it useful to supplement our findings with a more technical description of the survey. In fact, such description is essential for making it possible to judge the survey at its true scientific value. Besides a description of the scope of the survey, this report gives consideration to the sample and to the progress of the survey and the elaboration of the questionnaires. In the last part we describe the most important findings and supply them with some comments.

This study purposes to supply the need for systematically gathered information (or sociological knowledge) on the living conditions of children. This knowledge constitutes a value in itself and is necessary to tune policy better to the specific features and needs of this group. Through the fact that in sociological research children mostly cannot be studied as a separate social group, but as a part of a larger group like the family, it is very difficult to find useful information on them (Deven & Broos, 1991). Data on children often lie hidden in statistics or are lacking (Jensen & Saporiti, 1992). From the latest statistics (1996) of the Central Statistical Office in Belgium it is, for instance, very difficult to deduce how many children in total are concerned in divorces, because in 80% of the divorces recorded data are lacking on the number of children involved. At international level children have been included as a separate social group in sociologic research for the last ten years (Alanen, 1992; Bardy et al., 1990, 1995; Qvortrup, 1990). In Flanders as

well, various studies have already been carried out with the child (and not the family) as a unit of observation and/of analysis (Cantillon, Meulemans & Van Reusel: 1992, Child and Family, 1996;League of Large and Young Families, 1994; Speltinckx & Jacobs, 1996; Van Gils, 1991, 1995; Van Hese, Beirnaert & Colen, 1996).

Psychology and educational science have evidently always shown interest in (research on) children, but such interest was especially focused on the individual child and was often concerned with (the study of) child development and child education. The child was frequently subject of research but not always directly included in research. It was rather the practice to inform on children than putting questions to them. If views of children were studied, it happened within the framework of interpretations given and recorded by adults in line with a specific scientific tradition (see Alanen, 1992). A type of research carried out in the last ten years gives particular attention to the points of view of the children themselves. This kind of research, with which ours is connected, purposes to include children as subjects, in such a way that it enables them to supply their own significant information. One recognises children as "experienced" experts in their fields thus trying to abandon the adultocentrical position (Andenaes, 1996; Dahlberg, 1996; Oakley, 1993).

The present CBGS survey directly links up with the surveys of children's living conditions conducted in other European countries, namely the 1994 survey amongst ten year-old children by Wilk and Bacher in Austria and the 1993 study of 0-12 year old children by Peeters and Woldringh in the Netherlands. Especially in the former, children made extensively use of their opportunity to speak and much importance was attached to their points of view and competence. For the scope description of our survey in a wider social context we refer to publications in which we went deeply into the position of children in the family and society (Van den Bergh, 1994, 1996c); a more detailed description of the results can be found in Van den Bergh (1997).

Method

Sample

1.798 children contributed to the survey. They came from 68 schools (and 122 classes), dispersed all over Flanders. 1.240 parents participated: the children from 1.203 among them participated as well. 113 teachers co-operated.

In order to obtain a general image of the living conditions of all primary-school children in Flanders, a representative sample was taken of 71 schools out of the total number of schools from the Flemish and Brussels regions (n=2.117). The distribution of the 68 school over the provinces and the educational network (see table 1), is proportional to the distribution of schools across the provinces and the educational network in the population. It is a fact that in our sample big schools are relatively more frequent than in the population. Beforehand it was decided that in each school the children of all classes of one specific grade (or year) would contribute; the participating grade in a given school was chosen at random after the sampling.

Finally 958 children of the first, second and third grade participated and 840 children of the fourth, fifth and sixth grade. The distribution of children over the three lowest and the three highest years is proportional to that in the population.

table 1 about here

Table 2 shows the distribution by gender and average age of the children in each year. The gender of nine children is unknown. Most children were born in the 1983-1988 period, a number of them in 19981-1982 and another number in 1989.

table 2 about here

In order to obtain a general image of all primary-school children (born in the 1983-1988 period), it is not only necessary that the sampling be representative, but - obviously - that the extent of the response be large enough too. For determining the latter we calculated the response rate, namely the number of schools, teachers, children and parents that effectively contributed in regard to the number that potentially had been able to co-operate.

Initially the response rate of the schools amounted to 58/71. After replacement of the 13 schools selected which were unwilling to contribute, by as many schools from a standby sample (see Van den Bergh, 1995), 68 schools and 122 classes eventually co-operated. Recalculated the response of the schools totals 96% (68/71) and that of the teachers 93% (113/122), which is high. The total number of children (and parents) of the 122 participating classes amounted to 2.141. This group is considered to be the basic sample for children and parents. Calculated on this sample the children's response is 84% (1.789/2.141) and the parents' response 58% (1.240/2.141). In view of the positive response and the representativity of the sample of schools for the selection criteria laid down, we may claim that the information of the children and the parents can be considered to be a general image of the primary-school children and (though to a lesser extent) of their parents, provided that this information is gathered in a reliable way by means of safe and valid methods (see below).

Conduct of the survey

In order to check whether the information was gathered in a reliable way, we give below an outline of the course of the survey.

After the sampling the managements of the schools concerned were requested by telephone and letter to participate in the survey. All teachers and parents involved got written information on the survey. Only children who had their parents' permission contributed to the survey.

Being good at dealing with children is an essential requirement for gathering reliable information from them. Since we cannot take it for granted that professional survey investigators are experi-

enced in interviewing children, preference was given to students of educational science. The questionnaire interviews were held in all classes in December 1994 by 143 students. In order that the questioning in the class-room might take place in the best possible standardised way, the students received a short appropriate training from the author. Thus it was important that the survey in the classroom might be conducted by them and not by the teacher. It took up about two lesson periods. In order to increase the reliability of the information gathered by means of the questionnaire a manual with guidelines for the questioning was drawn up (see Van den Bergh, 1995). In all the classes of the first and the second years and in classes with more than 25 children the questionings were in principle conducted by two students each time, in the other classes by one. The students took care that the questionnaires were filled in individually. It was emphasised that the information supplied would be treated in the strictest confidence and anonymously processed. The children of the fourth, fifth and sixth grades who had finished filling in their questionnaires in time could - without being obliged - write a composition entitled "The school of my dreams ..." or "When I shall have children of my own".

Most teachers attended the carrying out of the survey in the classroom, where they kept in the background and filled in the questionnaires intended for them.

In most classes the survey went off well. The children showed much interest and generally co-operated willingly. This is confirmed by the answers of the children to the question whether they really enjoyed co-operating: almost seven out of every ten children enjoyed or much enjoyed it, nearly three out of ten enjoyed it a little and only one out of twenty did not enjoy it. However, for the children of the first year the survey was a bit too long.

At the end of the survey all questionnaires and compositions of the children (and in principle the questionnaires of the teachers too) were gathered by the students. Next the questionnaires were delivered by them to the author, together with a certificate - bearing a stamp of the school proving the effective carrying out of the survey - and a form in which they reproduced the concrete

progress of the survey in the classroom by means of a number of questions. This is important for making it possible to verify afterwards whether during the survey things happened which could influence the answers to the questions in one or other direction.

On the day of the survey the children whose parents too were prepared to co-operate received a "Parents' questionnaire" to take home. The parents filled it in at home and returned it to the Population and Family Study Centre (CBGS) in a post-paid envelope. Letters of thanks, letters of reminder and questionnaires of reminder were sent to parents and teachers and through these channels the children were thanked as well for their co-operation.

Value of the information gathered. Elaboration of the questionnaires

In order to evaluate the information gathered, it does not suffice to check whether it was collected in a reliable way but one can also try to determine the degree of reliability and validity of the questionnaires through which such information was gathered.

Since at the time of the carrying out of the survey no appropriate Dutch questionnaires were available for testing the quality of the living conditions among six-to-twelve-year-old children the author elaborated questionnaires intended for children, parents and teachers. For the children use was also made of an existing perceived competence scale. In discussing the questionnaires we paid especially attention to the children's questionnaires.

A child-centred questionnaire was made up for children of the first, second and third grade and another for children of the fourth, fifth and sixth grade. In all questionnaires use was made of appropriate, clear and visually attractive questions and multiple-choice answers with generally four or five answer categories. In the questionnaire of the oldest children many open questions were also mentioned; in the questionnaire of the youngest only a few. The selection of themes and the wording of the questions is based on talks with children, relevant international literature (Alanen et al., 1992; Bardy et al., 1990/1995), results of perception research of children in Flanders (Van Gils et al., 1991, 1992), relevant developmental psychological theories (Livesley

& Bromley et al., 1973) and existing instruments (Grietens & Hellinckx et al., 1993). Contacts were made with several experts at home and abroad. By explicit consent of the authors we could make good use of the questionnaires by Wilk and Bacher (1994), Peeters and Woldringh (1993), West and Sammons (1991). Allowance was made for the experiences of the authors and/or for the analyses of the questionnaires which were already performed (Davies & Brember et al., 1994). Provisional versions of the questionnaire were adjusted on the basis of individual interviews with six children of respectively six, seven, eight, nine, ten and eleven years old and of class interviews with children of two classes from the third year. Besides, the questionnaires were submitted to a number of experts. The appendix contains some examples of questions of the questionnaire for the younger children. The questionnaires can be applied for to the author.

After the terminology of Oosterveld and Vorst (1996) we can say that these questionnaires were developed in accordance with an inductive construction method. The questionnaires used can in their present form not yet be considered as psychometric scales. The reliability and validity test is only useful if these questionnaires or parts of them can develop into psychometric scales on the basis of the information gathered. For this purpose certain analyses, called explorative factor analyses, were carried out. Within the framework of a bachelor's thesis it will also be possible to test the coding of a number of open questions on their interrater reliability. From the description of the construction method used it can be deduced that these questionnaires have a good face validity.

Among the children of the fourth, fifth and sixth years the perceived competence was measured by means of the existing standardised questionnaire, namely the self-perception profile for children (SPPC; Veerman, 1989). This profile is a Dutch version of an American profile, namely "Self-Perception Profile for Children" by Harter (1985). Perceived competence is understood in it as a form of self-perception among children of about eight to twelve years old. For the children of the first, second and third years we ourselves composed an abbreviated and simplified version

of the SPPC for which we based ourselves on the existing teacher version of the profile. The SPPC consists of six subscales of six items each. One subscale is designed for measuring the total self-perception or the global self-worth. Five other subscales are intended for measuring specific aspects of self-perception namely competences experienced with regard to skills in school, social acceptance, sporting skills, physical appearance and behavioural conduct. The items are scored on a four-point-scale. The original American teacher version of the scale (Harter, 1985) includes 15 items, namely three for each subscale of specific competence. We translated these 15 items and added, both to the teacher version and to the younger children version, three items from the Global Self-worth subscale. For each child the teacher filled in the teacher version of the profile.

From a cross-cultural point of view this self-perception profile appears to possess good psychometrical qualities and has already been used frequently in international research. On the basis of the CBGS Survey of Children's Living Conditions this questionnaire was also examined psychometrically and standardised for Flemish Children of the fourth, fifth and sixth years. The reliability and validity go from good to very good. The psychometrical information and the standardisation are discussed in great detail in separate publications (Van den Bergh, 1996a; Van den Bergh & Marcoen, submitted; Van den Bergh & Van Ranst, submitted) and briefly included in the new manual of a Dutch version of the SPPC (Veerman et al., in press).

For the questionnaires of the parents and the teachers we conformed to the questionnaires composed by Peeters and Woldringh (1993) for their surveys, on the basis of existing profiles. These questionnaires can rather be considered as a written survey form.

Besides discovering a number of objective factors (e.g., type and size of the family) these questionnaires are especially focused on the knowledge of the subjective perception of parents and teachers with respect to the children's living conditions. We realise the difficulty of keeping un-

der control the social desirability of answers in written surveys. We refer to Moreas and Van den Bergh (1996) for the analysis of questions and answers from the parents' questionnaire.

Results

This report is intended to give a first picture of the living conditions of primary-school children in Flanders on the basis of a part of the information resulting from a representative sample of children and parents obtained through questionnaires.

We summarise the most significant findings and we supply them with some comments. Next we will reflect upon the nature and upon the scientific and societal value of the research performed. In this report special attention is given to a description of the information and not to an explanation or an interpretation of the findings. In the text we ask ourselves questions about various findings. They will form the subject of further analyses or continued research.

Information on the family from the parents

The majority of primary-school children (nine out of ten) is living in a two-parent family with both their biological parents which are married; half of the children have one brother or sister. The parents are owners of single-family dwellings with living rooms of 25 to 50 square metres in area. Both the children have separate bedrooms. The dwellings are connected with gardens, (small) gardens or courtyards. Mother is 36 years old on average, father 39. Among seven out of ten children, both the parents are engaged in gainful employment. The mothers are working 35 hours a week on average as part-timers, the fathers 52 on average as full-timers. Two-earner households have total monthly incomes ranging from 80,000 to 100,000 Belgian francs. Eight out often two-parent families can manage well on their family incomes. Only four out of ten one-parent families can manage well; their incomes are often under 50,000 Belgian francs. Six out of ten parents have the feeling of lacking time for their children, for themselves and for their partners.

Two thirds of the children have supper with the other members of the family every day. At least half of the children take breakfast and dinner with their families only at weekends; only one third of the children have breakfast together and one tenth lunch together.

The children's point of view

Nine out of ten children feel happy to very happy in their families. One tenth of the children feel often to very often sad and lonely at home; half of the children feel so now and them. Although children, who alternately live with their mother and father or only with their mother, find their family type a little less pleasant than children from other family types, they do not feel more frequently lonely or sad. Two in ten children feel often or very often tired by day; six out of ten feel sometimes tired. Children who not always or never live with both their parents feel more often tired than children who are always living with both parents. Two to three in ten children are mostly getting on very well with their brothers and sisters; half of them sometimes and one to two out of ten never. Three fourths of the children see one or both grandparents at least once a week. Nevertheless eight to nine out of ten would like to see their grandparents more often. Pets form part of the family for eight out of ten children.

Eight to nine in ten children have a good to a very good relationship with both their parents; mother is a little more kind than father and rewards the children more but both parents punish just as much. However, at least one tenth of the children finds that their mother and father are mostly not kind. They claim that they are never rewarded and often punished by them. Four out of ten young children think that their parents lack time for them; among the oldest two to threes in ten, think the same. Six out of 10 children are satisfied with the employment situation of both the parents. About half of the children (girls more than boys) help their parents at least once a week with tasks as clearing up their own rooms and putting away their toys, with laying the table and washing up. One third of the children take daily care of their pets. Real quarrels between

parents would occur in two out of ten families. Verbal disputes between parents and parents being among with each other happen in seven out of ten families.

The dwelling and the neighbourhood are for nine in ten children places where they like to live and where they feel well. Two out of ten children have little room to play at home; half of the children never play or only now and then outside in the neighbourhood. Two in ten have in the neighbourhood no friend and four of ten, three at most.

As regards leisure and games it appears that children, when they are with their families, like best to play with their mothers and fathers one or other (party)game. With their friends they just like to play and, if alone, they mostly watch TV, read or play computer games. One tenth of the children never play with each other at home; one third of the children do such weekly. Only three in ten children think that they lead no busy life; one out of three boys and one in five girls would like to have a quieter life.

Seven out of ten children like or love going to school, eight in ten are happy with the teacher and find the lessons definitely interesting.

About half of the children claim that they have to work hard to very hard. Half of the oldest do their homework in one hour or longer. Eight in ten children suffer from being teased; three out of ten are often to very often teased. Four fifths are satisfied with the playground. Half of them consider that they have not enough time to play. For one fifth of the children use is made of supervision facilities at school after school hours; seven to eight in ten children are satisfied to very satisfied with it.

Discussion

The position of the Flemish average primary-school child commented

From this results the conclusion could be drawn that there is every reason for optimism: the average primary-school child in Flanders appears to be well! However, this optimism may not

blind us to the persistent group of children of, each time, 10 to 20% who are not so well and to a number of alarming elements in the living conditions of the 'average' child.

As for various aspects of the living conditions we noticed that out of a primary-school population of almost 400,000 children (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1996a, 1996b) there is, each time, a group of some 40,000 to 80,000 children who are not at all well. So there are children who are living in a family that cannot manage on the available income, who are unhappy in their families, who often feel lonely, sad and tired, who have no pet, who feel not liked and are often punished but never rewarded by their parents, whose parents are often quarrelling, who have not much room to play at home, who have no friends in the neighbourhood, who never go playing at a friend's home, who feel definitely unwell at school, who are often teased.

The concurrence of several of these aspects includes a risk for the child's development. Such children often cannot get help for their problems at home. Nevertheless, they too have a right to feel secure within their families, to a sound development. Initiatives for working together with children in a concrete manner on their rights (e.g. Committee for Special Juvenile Care, Brugge, 1996), for extending preventive and curative services to which the children themselves can directly appeal (Spiesschaert, 1997) would really be beneficial to such children.

In a further analysis of our data we study the connection between these rather negative aspects in the concrete living conditions of the children. By means of (LISREL-) analyses we also try to discover the factors which influence the well-being of the child in his/her family and his/her self-perception (an important aspect in the child's development) (Van den Bergh and Van Ranst, in press).

About one third of the children think that the parents do not spend sufficient time on them and that they pay not enough attention to them. Approximately half of the parents hold that they lack time for their children. For an optimal development of self-esteem (the feeling to find oneself worthwhile) it seems indispensable that parents make their children feel that they find them

worthwhile and enable the latter to realise that their parents definitely want to share their precious time with them. The difference between "sharing time with a child" and "occupying oneself with a child in the time remaining by chance after work, obligations, recreation, sports, friends..." seems all-important. In view of the importance of self-esteem in the children's development these findings cannot be overlooked and necessitate to examine to what extent quantitative aspects of time (number of hours spent together) and qualitative aspects (how the time is spent together) are decisive in the parent-child relationship.

What also struck us was that the task division, or the children's assistance in household work, seems to be still very traditional. Is this a reflection of the tasks performed by the parents themselves? In general children are not a great help to their parents. Do people start from the idea that children are not prepared for this responsibility? What are they allowed to do and decide? Do they want to help more or not at all? Would the sharing of household tasks increase the children's involvement or not?

Children are very busy. About one fourth of them would like to live more quietly. Nevertheless a number of them would like to be more busy. Do they prepare their completely full programmes themselves? What are their programmes like? Are they influenced or guided and by whom?

In the case of four out of ten children, fewer than four friends are living in the neighbourhood. Fewer than half of the children are playing regularly at their friends' homes. Half of the children never play or only now and then outside in the neighbourhood. To what extent can we still speak of "playing children"? How much time and (safe) room remain for unprogrammed, unorganised activities in an environment which is not controlled by adult people? Do children really prefer to watch T.V., to see videos, to read and to play computer games or are they often forced to follow these rather solitary occupations?

It is disquieting that one fifth of the children hold rather negative to very negative views on the school. Half of the children think that they must work (too?) hard for school. Being teased is for

eight in ten children a problem to a smaller or langer extent. How do the children experience these problems? What problems do the teachers are faced with? From whom do they expect help?

We hope to be able to answer one part of the questions by analysing the as yet unprocessed answers from the children's and parents' questionnaires and by performing the first analysis of the teachers' questionnaires. Another part of the questions will be the subject of a second part of the survey, which has still to be carried out. In this, in-depth interview will be held with a subgroup of children and parents.

Assessment of the scientific and social value of the survey

This survey, in which the child is the unit of observation and analysis and in which entire attention is given to the child's point of view, is on the interface between sociology and psychology.

The sample was finally composed starting from the child (at a first stage, from his/her school and class) and not proceeding from the parents or the family. The family is described from the point of view of the child, not otherwise. This means that the child is the unit of observation and analysis. Since the survey was carried out by means of a representative sample of primary-school children, useful sociologic information on children as a separate population group has been obtained, which, in view of the scarcity of such information, must be considered to be a valuable contribution.

The information having been gathered from the children's point of view does not alter the fact that other sociologic analyses can be carried out on them, for instance, a comparison at the level of the families, of specific socio-economic classes, of schools from particular school networks. On account of the purpose of our survey, namely, making a representative study of the position of primary-school children, certain restrictions are placed on it. So it is that our sample only comprises a minority of children from one-parent families and from reconstituted families. If more information is wanted on quantitatively rather exceptional families, we refer to studies of

samples relating thereto. In our survey children were explicitly included as subjects of investigation. Obviously within the framework of our questions they had an opportunity to inform us on their particular significance and their own points of view. The significance given by the children themselves is, so to speak, implied in the answers and could be further disclosed. In the answers to the open questions, in the compositions of the children the individual elucidation of their significance more directly exists, which will also be in the in-depth interviews to be held. In the latter, however, we miss the representation of/for the whole group of children. This lack can partly be compensated for by, for instance, coding the answers to the open questions and by tracing the frequencies of occurrence of a specific type of answer.

Here too it is accepted that research giving entire attention to the children's views and significance does not alter the fact that the information can also be used for an analysis of themes which have already been studied in psychology and educational science for a long time, such for instance as the development of personal perception and competence. Knowledge of these development phenomena is every important for gathering efficiently information on children of different ages. Up to now this knowledge formed rather an impediment to involving young children in research. Children under eight were, for instance, not personally associated in research on their living conditions. It was argued that there were not yet able to reason in the abstract and to understand the questions. However it is possible to abandon the adultocentrical point of view (in which children are assessed by standards applying to adults) and to take (the level of) the child as a point of departure. Concretely this means that adjusted research methods are used by which the questions put to young children are not too abstract (Harter, 1996) and by which use is made of pictograms that can also be easily understood by children who have not yet a ready command of the (written) language (The pictogram use (inter alia the "Smiley Scale" utilized by us) has also been adopted in certain schools (in both the nursery classes and the first years of primary education)).

One may wonder if children are really reliable as respondents. As long as we have no proof to the contrary, we are not in doubt. Problems experienced among children are like some as those arising among adult respondents. There are for instance, the problems of the social desirability of answers and of suggestibility. These have among children specific features of which one should be aware inorder to enable oneself to anticipate in an adjusted way (Oakley, 1993; Scharlaeckens & Zink, 1993). The loyalty of children to their parents can influence the children's answers. This problem can partly be solved by questioning children in a context allowing them to answer as independently of their parents as possible (for instance, in the classroom) and by emphasizing the confidentiality and the anonymity of the information, like this happened in our survey.

In this survey we let children speak themselves and in the analysis of the information we start from the answers given by the children. In the further analyses information from parents, on the one hand, and children, on the other, can be compared with regard to themes, such for instance as the task division in the family, and possible discrepancies can be established. However, a discrepancy noticed does not imply that the children's answers are less reliable or less correct than those of the parent's it points to a difference in perception between various groups of respondents and to the importance of gathering in research, information from different sources. Each group of respondents have to be considered as one source of information; children as much as adults must be respected as fully-fledged respondents.

Moreover, the fact that younger children score more extremely in many questions than older, does not necessarily mean that younger children are less reliable respondents than older. It most probably indicates that younger children receive things in a less shaded way (more black or white) than older and this is in itself a significant finding in dealing with the children's point of view.

Conclusions

We may conclude that in a sociological survey (by which a representative sample of primary-school children has been taken) we opted for methods out of psychology (quantifiable child-centred questionnaires, optimalisation of children's involvement in questioning, questioning by means of standardised questionnaires and standardised scoring): this furnished evidence that it is possible to associate children as respondents in research and to obtain in this manner reliable and scientifically justified information on children's living conditions.

The fact that children can be considered to be reliable respondents is not only scientifically relevant but is also of a considerable societal and political value. A sound policy cannot ignore children. Generally children have no say in the political debate, which is undemocratic. Children must be taken more seriously. In family policy, for instance, it is important to make allowance for the views and experiences of children with regard to the family. If a dialogue with children is not (yet) really possible in politics, it is all the more important that others speak on behalf of children (e.g., ombudspersons' service for children) on the basis of what children consider to be important. A means to know what children find important consists in involving them in research in a direct child-adapted way. Thus, children are highlighted as a group and will perhaps have the opportunity that others, on behalf of them, can let hear their voice. Children and knowledge of children are required to make it possible to attune policy to children as well. Starting from the information supplied by children, policymakers can question themselves on, for instance, time spending in the families, structural measures like an overall reconsideration of the division of time and the environmental planning in society (Van den Bergh, 1996b,c).

By this survey children were given the opportunity to prove that they have competences which were doubted. (At the start of the survey a number of teachers of the first and second years were very doubtful whether the children would be able to fill in the questionnaires). This is an important element in the struggle for children's rights: as long as children have not the opportunity to

prove their competence, their alleged incompetence will remain the ground for denying them specific rights (Verhellen, 1993).

The knowledge acquired trough this survey and the fact that children were given the opportunity to prove that they are able to give information about themselves and their living conditions, in a reliable way, are important findings of our research. We think that we may conclude that the results obtained in terms of (living conditions of) children are scientifically and socially relevant and valuable.

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Table 1.

Distribution of the number of schools in the sample (n=68), by province and by educational network

Province	**Number**
Antwerp	17
Brabant	11
Limburg	14
East Flanders	16
West Flanders	10
Educational network	**Number**
Community education	7
Subsidized public education	11
Subsidized denominational education	43
Total	68

Source: CBGS survey of living conditions of children (1994-1995).

Table 2.

Distribution by gender and average age in the six years of the sample (n=1.789)

Grade	Boys	Girls	Average age
1st	122	127	6 yrs + 9 mths
2nd	187	222	7 yrs + 10 mths
3rd	117	176	8 yrs + 9 mths
4th	234	120	9 yrs + 9 mths
5th	89	139	10 yrs + 9 mths
6th	122	134	11 yrs + 9 mths
Total	871	918	9 yrs + 2 mths

Source: CBGS Survey of Living Conditions of Children (1994-1995)

APPENDIX 1

THE CHILDREN'S QUESTIONNAIRES

Children's Questionnaire 1 - 2 - 3

In the children's questionnaire for the first, second and third years is aimed at a very simple but clear lay-out. In the introduction of the questionnaire we make children understand in an uncomplicated way what a questionnaire is. This introduction also comprises illustrating question and answer exercises. In order not to distract children unnecessarily, the questionnaire has not been divided into separate parts. Each page mostly contains only five questions which are always numbered from one to five. The questionnaire amounts to 29 pages and successive pages have diversified colours. This is not only attractive but also facilitates questioning in the classroom (namely the control whether all children have the right page before them). For children who have not yet a ready command of the written language, there is every advantage in retricting reading and writing to a minimum. Therefore the categories of answers to be indicated are represented by attractive pictograms elucidating visually the content of each category of answer.

Children's Questionnaire 4 - 5 - 6

The questionnaire for the children of the fourth, fifth and sixth years contains an introduction and is further made up of four separate parts. The numbering of the questions recommences in each part. All pages have the same, yellow colour. They partly consist of the same questions and pictograms as the younger children's questionnaire (see enclosed example). The pages also consist of more open questions and answer tables.

The older children can fill in the questionnaire independently. If each of them does this at his/her own pace, each item can, for instance, be followed by a rest and checking period. The items are:

Part 1 : Your family (pp. 1 -14)

Part 2 : The dwelling and the neigbourhood where you live (pp. 15 -16)

Part 3 : The school (pp. 17 - 21)

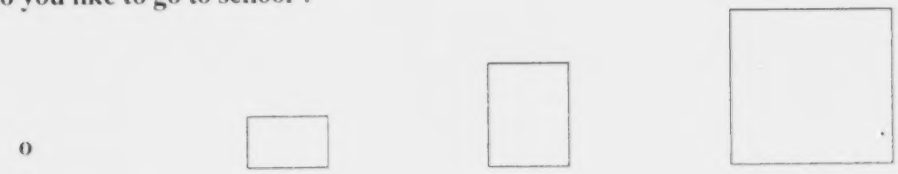
Part 4 : Your leisure time, your friends, and who and what you find important in your life pp. 22 -29).

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CHILDREN , GRADE 1-2-3

♥ **my name is :** .....

1

do you like to go to school ?



o no | a little | quite a lot | a lot

2

how do you feel in the classroom?

3

how do you feel on the playground during playtime in your school?

4

does your mother/stepmother work?

- she stays at home and does no paid work
- she stays at home and does paid work at home
- she sometimes stays at home and she sometimes goes to work
- she goes out to work